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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: The Tullahoma Campaign, The Beginning of the End for the Confederacy

Author: Major Julian D. Alford USMC

Thesis: The results of the Tullahoma Campaign had enormous effects on the outcome of the American Civil War. The Tullahoma Campaign was strategically more important than Gettysburg and tactically superior to Vicksburg. The Tullahoma Campaign was the beginning of the end for the Confederate cause and was a huge step in the preservation of the Union.

Discussion: The Tullahoma Campaign of 1863 is often overlooked and overshadowed by the simultaneous events of Gettysburg and Vicksburg. The results of the campaign fought by Union General William S. Rosecrans and Confederate General Braxton Bragg were strategically more significant than Gettysburg and tactically equivalent to Vicksburg. For the North, Rosecrans and his Army of the Cumberland conducted a campaign of light attacks and aggressive maneuvers that drove the Confederate Army of Tennessee completely out of the state of Tennessee. The results of the campaign for the Union formed the starting point for General William T. Sherman's capture of Atlanta and his subsequent march to the sea. For the South, losing the Tullahoma Campaign and the ultimate retreat from the state of Tennessee proved to be too much from which to recover. With the loss of manpower, agricultural staples, the industrial base of the region and most importantly, the Chattanooga railroad center, the Tullahoma Campaign was the beginning of the end for the Confederacy.

Conclusion: At the beginning of the war, the Federals stated three major objectives that they needed to accomplish in order to be victorious. First, take Richmond and kill the secessionist spirit by conquering the Rebel capital. This had been attempted repeatedly but never accomplished up to this point. Second, control the Mississippi Valley and secure the western waterways. Grant had accomplished this objective by capturing Vicksburg. Finally, seize east Tennessee and hold the Nashville-Atlanta corridor, which was seen by the Federals as the major artery in the southern lifeline. Rosecrans' Army of the Cumberland had achieved most of this objective in the Tullahoma Campaign and Major General William T. Sherman would finish the objective the following summer. Winning the Tullahoma Campaign and capturing Middle Tennessee was the start of obtaining the third stated objectives.

The Setting

The Tullahoma Campaign conducted in the summer of 1863 had enormous strategic results on the final outcome of the American Civil War. Often this brilliant campaign of light attacks and aggressive maneuvers to capture Middle Tennessee, conducted by Major General William S. Rosecrans and his Army of the Cumberland, is overshadowed by the simultaneous events at Gettysburg and Vicksburg. It can be argued that the results of the Tullahoma Campaign, for the Union, were strategically more important than Gettysburg and tactically superior to Vicksburg.

On June 24, 1863 the Union Army of the Cumberland began the campaign that would eventually totally divide the Confederacy. Over the next nine days, in terrible and unprecedented rainy weather, the Union Army would completely maneuver General Braxton Bragg's Army of Tennessee out of Middle Tennessee. By forcing the Confederates out of the state for which they were named, the South lost the human, agricultural and industrial capacity of the region. In addition, by eventually losing the important railhead city of Chattanooga, the foundation was set for Major General William T. Sherman's capture of

Atlanta and his famous march to the sea less than one year later.¹

During the campaigning season of 1863, the Union adopted three strategic objectives in order to win the war. Included were capturing the Confederate capital of Richmond, controlling the entire Mississippi River and winning the Tullahoma Campaign. Of the three stated objectives, winning the Tullahoma Campaign was the strategically most important. In doing so they would divide the Confederacy by driving a wedge in the heartland of the south, gain possession of the railhead at Chattanooga and eventually control all of East Tennessee.

Chattanooga was strategically important to both the North and the South. If possessed by the Federal Army, it would practically isolate Virginia and North Carolina on one hand and separate Mississippi and Alabama on the other. In addition, it would open the way into the interior of Georgia and the lower Atlantic region. If controlled by the Confederates, Chattanooga enabled the south to control all of eastern Tennessee, which in turn enabled them to easily move reinforcements between Virginia in the east and Tennessee and Mississippi in the west. Possession of the supply base at Chattanooga also allowed the south to

constantly threaten Kentucky and the lower Ohio River region.²

Although Chattanooga had only 2,545 inhabitants in 1860, its importance to the north cannot be measured by its size. Situated where the Tennessee River passes through the Cumberland Mountains, forming gaps, it was called the key to East Tennessee and the gateway to the South. Chattanooga had four railroad lines radiating in four principal directions; north-northwest to Nashville, west to Memphis, south to Atlanta and the eastern seaboard, and northeast by way of Knoxville to Richmond and the eastern states.

The region of Middle and East Tennessee was also important because it was rich in grain such as wheat, corn and hay. In addition, there was an abundance of beef, pork, horses and mules. The region not only supported the Confederate Army in Tennessee, but also supplied large quantities of provisions for the southern armies in Virginia and Mississippi.³

From very early in the war, President Lincoln believed that the possession of Chattanooga was the gateway to the sea and a huge step towards complete victory for the Union. Many times he stated to his senior generals

"East Tennessee was the key to victory. Whoever could control that mountainous piece of geography would strategically control the outcome of the conflict."

Lincoln further stated directly to General Rosecrans, "To take and hold the railroad at or east of Cleveland, in East Tennessee, I think fully as important as the taking and holding of Richmond. If we can hold Chattanooga and East Tennessee, I think the rebellion must dwindle and die. I think you and General Burnside can do this and hence doing so is your main object."⁴

Politically East Tennessee was important to Lincoln as well. He felt compelled to free the people of the region because those living in the mountainous area wanted to remain in the Union. Those people maintained their allegiance to the Old Whig Party and disliked the rich plantation owners who occupied much of the rest of Tennessee. In addition, the people of the mountainous region disagreed with the reasons for secession.

Impatient at the inaction, the War Department in Washington urged Rosecrans to move against Bragg's army. Major General Ulysses S. Grant, conducting his Vicksburg Campaign, wanted pressure applied against Bragg's army, which was defending in the vicinity of Tullahoma. This was important in order to prevent all or part of Bragg's army from reinforcing the Confederates in Mississippi. At the same time, Andrew Johnson, the military Governor of

Tennessee, reminded the authorities in Washington of the plight of the East Tennesseans.

The final outcome of the war and the unconditional surrender of the south in the spring of 1865 can be connected directly to the three campaigns conducted in June and early July of 1863. The Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg are often sited as the greatest victories of the North and regarded as the battles that began the end for the Confederacy. It can be argued however, that the Union victory in the Tullahoma Campaign was strategically more important than those of Gettysburg and Vicksburg. The reason that the Tullahoma Campaign is forgotten is that it was the least bloody major campaign of the war. Union casualties for the period of June 24 to July 3 were reported as 84 killed, 473 wounded and 13 captured for a total of 570. Confederate casualties were not completely reported but the number killed and wounded were more than likely comparable to the North. However, the number of Rebels captured was another matter entirely. The Army of the Cumberland reported 1,634 Confederate prisoners.⁵

As the Tullahoma Campaign came to a close, the importance of the Union victory seemed to make no impression on Washington. On July 7, Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, telegraphed General Rosecrans the news of

the Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg. During that telegram, Stanton asked Rosecrans if

"You and your noble army now have the chance to give the finishing blow to the rebellion. Will you neglect the chance?"

Rosecrans promptly replied;

"You do not appear to observe the fact that this noble army had driven the rebels from Middle Tennessee, of which my dispatch informed you. I beg you... do not overlook so great an event because it is not written in letters of blood."⁶

In the Confederacy capital of Richmond, the disasters were complete across the map. On July 3, the South had lost a great battle at Gettysburg, followed the next day by their surrender at Vicksburg, and finally their complete loss of Middle Tennessee. After such massive losses, the one place that Jefferson Davis felt that his armies might reverse the situation was in Middle Tennessee.

A number of influential people within the Confederacy, foremost among them, General P.G.T. Beauregard, had been advocating a strategy since the early spring of 1863. His strategy included drawing together all troops that the Confederacy could possibly spare, massing them in Bragg's army, attacking Rosecrans' army and thereby retaking Middle and East Tennessee.⁷ The plan called for an immediate concentration in Chattanooga involving forces from East Tennessee now commanded by Major General Simon Bolivar

Buckner. In addition, forces from the Army of Northern Virginia, forces from the North Carolina coast, and the forces commanded by General Joe Johnson in southern Mississippi were to be used for reinforcements. The idea was for Bragg's new reinforced Army of Tennessee to attack north and retake Nashville and then use Nashville as a base of operation to attack through Kentucky to the Ohio River. The thought was that once the Ohio River was regained, this huge army could move east toward Washington or attack west toward the Mississippi River in order to cut Grant's lines of communication and relieve Vicksburg.

Initially Bragg liked the plan but after meeting with General Johnson, he seemed to change his mind about the prospect of success in the plan.⁸ Whatever the reason for the hesitation by Bragg, Jefferson Davis did not embrace the plan and push him into action. Portions of this grand plan did take place some two months later, just in time for the Battle of Chickamauga, but the big offensive to the north never took place. The importance of East and Middle Tennessee for the survival of the Confederacy was very clear to some in the Rebel high command, however the Confederate President and his most senior generals did not seem to understand that the war would be won or lost in Tennessee.

Rosecrans' Situation and the Army of the Cumberland

Major General William Starke Rosecrans was from the state of Ohio and graduated fifth in his class from West Point in 1842. He was assigned to the elite Corps of Engineers where he served in that capacity for 12 years before resigning to pursue his fortune in business. Shortly after the war began April 1861, the Ohio governor commissioned Rosecrans a brigadier general of volunteers.⁹

Rosecrans was a picture perfect general. On a horse he sat with a straight back, chest out, hand thrown back and carrying an unlit cigar clamped between his teeth. He looked like a Roman general when touring his troops in the field. Rosecrans was a fighter, a soldier's general, one of the boys - his troops called him Rosey.¹⁰ Rosecrans had fared well as a commander at the Battle of Corinth in Mississippi and turned a sure defeat at the Battle of Stones River in Murfreesboro, Tennessee into a victory for the north. Rosecrans had a knack for dramatic moments. In combat, he seemed to be everywhere, always pressing forward, not flinching from the enemy, a brave soldier. Seemingly incapable of staying still, Rosecrans had a habit

of staying up all night on the eve of a battle, chatting and even singing to pass the time. Although he was a devout Roman Catholic, Rosecrans was known for having an extremely sharp and colorful tongue. Having what it takes to plan and then carry forth a campaign, some have called Rosecrans the north's most brilliant strategist of the war.¹¹

After the Battle of Stones River, which ended on January 2, 1863, Rosecrans found himself in a situation that included many logistical problems. The problem with advancing into Middle Tennessee and then into the heartland of the south was that his supply lines would stretch through hundreds of miles of hostile territory. When the Army of the Cumberland left the security of the Cumberland River in Nashville, it had to rely exclusively on a long thin rail line that was vulnerable to constant raids from enemies such as Nathan Bedford Forrest and John Hunt Morgan. These Confederate Calvary leaders in the western theater were experts at mounting lightning raids on federal supply lines. In return, Rosecrans had an extremely weak Calvary Corps to combat the southern raiders. Additionally, his engineer corps and topographical corps were almost non-existent. In order to correct these problems, much time was needed; however, Washington did not

want to afford Rosecrans the resources or allow him the time to make such corrections.

At the tactical level Rosecrans had a serious dilemma facing him. He needed to get the rebel army out of his front and open the way to Chattanooga. The prospect of a frontal assault on the Shelbyville defenses in front of Bragg's headquarters in Tullahoma turned the Union general's stomach.¹² Rosecrans had three gaps through which he could move that were immediately in front of Bragg's two corps. Guy's Gap in front of Polk's corps at Shelbyville, Liberty Gap and Hoover's Gap both in front of Hardee's corps at Wartrace and Beech Grove respectively. Each of these gaps passed through the formidable mountain range known as the Highland Rim. Having a good road that led to Manchester, Hoover's Gap seemed like the best option of the three for Rosecrans and his army. Manchester was important because Rosecrans' army could flank the right of Bragg's army and also threaten his rear. The problem with that route was that the road crossed Garrison's Fork of the Duck River and then climbed out of the river valley through a narrow ravine known locally as Matt's Hollow. In addition, the Hoover's Gap route offered plenty of opportunities for Bragg to shift his forces and catch the Federal Army strung out on both sides of the gap.

It was not necessary for Rosecrans to limit his offensive thrust to the three gaps in the Highland Rim. Instead he could swing directly east from his base at Murfreesboro, ascend the plateau of the Barrens and then angle south to McMinnville on Bragg's right flank (See map). Unfortunately there were several problems with this plan. First, this plan would take him far from the railroad through barren country devoid of food and forage. It was seventy-five miles from Murfreesboro to Tullahoma by way of McMinnville and the roads across the Barrons between the latter two towns were questionable at best. Dragging the army on that roundabout route would thus be a logistical nightmare.¹³ In addition, this plan would leave Rosecrans' base at Murfreesboro completely uncovered. Finally, the McMinnville flanking option would place 15,000 confederate troops positioned in East Tennessee above Knoxville under the command of Major General Simon Buckner on the eastern flank of the Army of the Cumberland.

The third option that Rosecrans had was to move around Bragg's southwestern flank. This plan would eliminate most of the earlier stated problems. The area to the west of Bragg's position had lower hills, did not have narrow gaps and the foraging was much better than the Barrens. The trouble with this route was that it would push the Federals

even further from its objective of Chattanooga and would expose the army to a counterstroke if Bragg should drive toward Nashville, which would be even more devastating because they would lose both Murfreesboro and Nashville.¹⁴

While Rosecrans pondered what plan to use and concentrated on building up his calvary forces during the months of May and June, Washington was fuming at his inaction. General in Chief, Major General Henry W. Halleck and Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton constantly wired Rosecrans for a movement forward. The President, Abraham Lincoln, wrote on May 28,

"I would not push you to any rashness, but I am very anxious that you do your utmost, short of rashness, to keep Bragg from getting off to help Johnston against Grant."

Rosecrans curtly dismissed all of Washington's prodding and would not be hurried until he felt that everything was right.¹⁵

In early June, Rosecrans promised Halleck a movement at an unspecified future date. He then held a council with his corps and division commanders to find if they felt that the army was ready to advance. All fifteen generals were unanimous in the belief that the army was not yet ready for the campaign on Chattanooga.¹⁶ The one dissenting voice in Rosecrans' camp was his Chief of Staff and principal aide,

Brigadier General James A. Garfield, future president of the United States. Garfield advised Rosecrans

"Your general movement has been wisely delayed until now, till your army could be massed and calvary mounted."¹⁷

Rosecrans ignored Garfield's advice and forwarded to Halleck a summary of his general's advice that the army was not yet ready for a general movement. On June 16, Halleck wired Rosecrans a response

"Is it your intention to make an immediate movement forward? A definite answer yes or no, is required."

Rosecrans answer,

"In reply to your inquiry, if immediate means tonight or tomorrow, no. If it means as soon as all things are ready, say five days, yes."

Seven days later, Rosecrans wired Halleck,

"The army begins to move at three o'clock this morning."¹⁸

Rosecrans' final decision on which plan to follow was in part made by his subordinate commanders. They all advised against moving on Bragg's left flank. They felt that moving away from their base of operation while at the same time moving further away from the objective of Chattanooga was poor strategy. A direct assault was out of the question. As a result, it was decided that they would take the more difficult course through the mountain gaps

and around Bragg's right. Rosecrans issued the orders and on 24 June at three o'clock in the morning the Tullahoma Campaign got underway for the Army of the Cumberland.

Bragg's Situation and the Army of Tennessee

At the time of the Tullahoma Campaign, Braxton Bragg was forty-six years old and the commander of the Army of Tennessee. He was a native of Warrenton, North Carolina and graduated fifth in his class from West Point in 1841. He had fought in the Mexican War as a captain of an artillery battery where he won nationwide fame at Buena Vista when his guns stopped a crucial Mexican attack.¹⁹ In 1849, Bragg wed Eliza "Elise" Brooks Ellis, a rich daughter of a Louisiana sugar plantation owner, and in 1856 he resigned from the army to try his hand at planting on the family plantation.

On March 7, 1861, shortly before the outbreak of the war, Bragg was commissioned a brigadier general by the new Confederacy and assigned to command the Coastal Defenses of Pensacola and Mobile. He was promoted to Major General in September of 1861 and full general in April 1862. Bragg commanded a corps at the Battle of Shiloh and assumed command of the Army of Tennessee on June 27, 1862. Bragg

invaded Kentucky from August to October 1862, where Major General Don Carlos Buell at Perryville defeated him. In late December 1862 to January 1863 at the Battle of Stones River in Murfreesboro, Tennessee Bragg was again defeated, this time by Rosecrans.²⁰

Bragg was unpopular with his subordinates. Following the failed Kentucky Campaign and the retreat from Murfreesboro, Bragg seemed to slip into a state of depression. His depression was exacerbated by his continual ill health. He suffered from migraine headaches, boils, dyspepsia, chronic diarrhea and rheumatism. His bouts of illness made people around him think that he always had a sour temper and irritable attitude. Through all his problems, Bragg seemed to keep the favor of his President, Jefferson Davis.

Shortly after retreating from Murfreesboro, Bragg began receiving comments, both written and spoken, about his ability to command. In order to clear any doubt about his abilities, Bragg sent a letter to all his corps and division commanders asking them to acquit him of the published allegation that he had insisted on the retreat against the advise of his officers. In the letter dated January 11, he wrote

"It becomes necessary for me to save my fair name, if I cannot stop the deluge of abuse which will destroy my usefulness and demoralize this army."

He further stated

"The retreat was resisted by me for some time after advised by my corps and division commanders... unanimous as you were in council in verbally advising a retrograde movement, I cannot doubt that you will cheerfully attest the same in writing."

If he had stopped at that point, he would have been on fairly safe ground, but he went on;

"I desire that you will consult your subordinate commanders and be candid with me... General Smith has been called to Richmond - it is supposed with a view to supercede me. I shall retire without a regret if I find I have lost the good opinion of my generals, upon whom I have ever relied upon as a foundation of rock."²¹

Bragg's officers took this rare opportunity to be very candid with what they thought of his ability to continue to command the army. The majority of his officers wrote that they did not feel he possessed the confidence of the army and a change of command was necessary for the good of the cause. Many that replied took the sting out the their comments by stating their personal regard for his patriotism, gallantry and personal character. Ironically though, most also agreed that the retreat from Murfreesboro was advisable.

Richmond got wind of the dissent in Bragg's army shortly after the retreat from Murfreesboro. President Davis sent General Johnston to Murfreesboro in late January to investigate the disaffection and dissatisfaction with Bragg's leadership. Davis wrote Johnston on January 22 of Bragg's candid correspondence with his subordinates, commenting,

"Why General Bragg should have selected that tribunal and have invited its judgments upon him is to me unexplained. It manifests, however, a condition of things which seem to me to require your presence... although my confidence in General Bragg is unshaken, it cannot be doubted that if he is distrusted by his officers and troops, a disaster may result."²²

It was found by both General Johnston and President Davis that Bragg should stay in command of the Army of Tennessee.

The Tullahoma Campaign during June and July 1863 illuminated both Bragg's shortcomings and his abilities as an army commander. Following the months after the retreat from Murfreesboro he spent most of his time in quarrels with his subordinates. Against the counsel of his generals, Bragg insisted on holding his position at Tullahoma. When the Federals finally advanced however, he turned to his generals for advice. During this time, the Richmond authorities neglected the Army of Tennessee and even lost all contact with it during its most critical

days. And yet, Bragg managed to save his army from capture or serious damage, which was more than the Confederacy's other major army commanders, General Pemberton and General Lee, accomplished during this critical period.²³

Bragg made his headquarters at Tullahoma and deployed his infantry in front of him behind the Highland Rim. His wide-spread position was about fifteen miles from end to end, with the cavalry stretched far beyond on either flank. Bragg had two reasons for this deployment. First, and most important, was supplies. The region of Middle Tennessee was abundant with agriculture. In fact, Lee's Army of Northern Virginia got a large portion of its supplies from this region. Bragg was actually directed by Richmond to live off the land so that most of the supplies in the huge Atlanta depot could go to the eastern army. For this reason, Bragg dispersed his army widely, maximizing the territory that could be swept clean of supplies.²⁴

Bragg acknowledges that a better defensive position to protect Chattanooga would have been in the Appalachian foothills northwest of that important railhead. The hills however, were too barren to maintain his men and he would have given up the fertile ground of Middle Tennessee.²⁵

Tactics was the second reason Bragg spread his army to cover a wide front. He hoped to prevent Rosecrans from

stealing a march and turning his flank. Instead he was attempting to force the Federal army to attack through one of the four main gaps that he was defending. Polk's Corps was anchored at Shelbyville about twenty-five miles due south of Murfreesboro. Shelbyville covered the southern end of Guy's Gap. Further right, Hardee's Corps was covering the southern ends of Bell Buckle Gap and Liberty Gap in front of Wartrace, which was eight miles east of Shelbyville and fifteen miles north of Tullahoma. Additionally, Hardee's Corps was covering the southern end of Hoover's Gap, which was another seven miles northeast of Liberty Gap. (See map) The Nashville and Chattanooga Railroads ran through the Bell Buckle Gap, while the Liberty, Hoover and Guy Gaps had north-south turnpikes running through them. The Confederate Cavalry was spread far on either flank to prevent any possible move by Rosecrans to go wide around either flank.²⁶

Bragg thought the most likely scenario was a Federal advance against one of the gaps that Hardee was guarding. The defensive works that Polk was holding at Shelbyville were very strong. Bragg's plan was for Hardee to react quickly and decisively at the moment of attack in order to seal off the Union penetration, while Polk's Corps swung forward and to the right to strike the Federals in the

flank. The concern was whether or not Hardee could make a stand before the whole position gave way.

The Tullahoma Campaign, A Great Maneuver

After much planning, preparing, poking and prodding, Rosecrans was ready to move against Bragg's Army positioned just north of Tullahoma. Rosecrans knew that a frontal assault against Bragg's positions would be very costly. Even if the Federal Army defeated Bragg's Army with a head-on assault, the Rebels could retreat along narrow and winding roads while fighting an easy withdrawal action. Rosecrans' plan called for a turning movement of Bragg's right and seizes the railroad bridge over the Elk River, south of Tullahoma.²⁷

Before daylight on June 23, Rosecrans would push an extremely heavy calvary force, commanded by Brigadier General David Stanley and supported by the Army's Reserve corps, commanded by Major General Gordon Granger, towards the Shelbyville defenses so Bragg would focus his attention on his left. This feint allowed the Union's three regular infantry corps to scale the Highland Rim and turn Bragg's right flank. Rosecrans' feint in one direction and thrust in another completely fooled and confused Bragg. Bragg,

using military common sense, assumed that Rosecrans would take advantage of the level country and good roads west of the railroad and send his attack down the Shelbyville route against his left.

The Tullahoma Campaign would be fought in an almost constant rain over the next eleven days. The rain and the resulting conditions of the roads would have serious consequences for Rosecrans and would produce the only good results Bragg would achieve during the campaign.²⁸ With a substantial feint against Bragg's left, Rosecrans hoped to hold Polk in his Shelbyville defenses so that he could not reinforce Hardee in the center and right. While Bragg was preoccupied with the feint on his left, Rosecrans planned to send the Thomas' XIV Corps and McCook's XX Corps down the Manchester route to threaten Hardee. With Bragg's defenses in check, Crittenden's XXI Corps would be marching far to the east, down obscure and difficult roads through the Barrons, to gain Bragg's right rear and cut his communications with Chattanooga.²⁹

Rosecrans contemplated that once Bragg discovered that his communications were cut he would have to retreat out of his defensive works and withdraw south toward Alabama. Rosecrans could then compel Bragg to fight him on unprepared ground and at a disadvantage. The trap was

never completely set, primarily because of the difficulty of the roads but also because Bragg was able to save his Army and fall back on this communication toward Chattanooga.

At 0300 on 24 June, the Union Infantry Corps began to move. Leading the XIV Corps, Colonel John Wilder's Lightning Brigade, attacked the Confederate 1st Kentucky Cavalry on pickets duty in front of Hoover's Gap seven miles south of Murfreesboro. The Confederates skirmished briefly then retreated back into the gap. Being part infantry and part cavalry, Wilder's Brigade of mounted infantry would attack on foot using the new Spencer seven shot repeating rifles, then pursue on horseback. By midmorning the Union was in control of Hoover's Gap. At the same time Thomas' XIV Corps was pressing on Hoover's Gap, McCook's XX Corps was moving on Hardee's forces at Liberty Gap.

Throughout the entire day of June 24 and most of the day on June 25, Bragg completely lost command and control of Hardee's Corps. He did not realize that Hoover's Gap and Liberty Gap had been attacked and was therefore concentrating his efforts on Polk's Corps around Shelbyville. There is not adequate explanation for the lack of communication between Bragg and Hardee as Tullahoma

was only twenty miles south of Hardee's headquarters at Wartrace. The Army of Tennessee seemed to be of the mindset that if Bragg did not ask about the unfolding events, then they would not offer the information to him. Bragg's calvary on his right, commanded by Major General Joe Wheeler, never reported any action from that side either.³⁰

During the entire day of June 25, one division of McCook's Corps was attacking Confederate positions in Liberty Gap although never breaking through the gap. At the same time, Thomas was moving his entire corps through Hoover's Gap. On the morning of June 26, Rosecrans ordered McCook to shift two of his divisions to the east and follow the XIV Corps through Hoover's Gap while one of his divisions continued to keep the rebels occupied at Liberty Gap.

While the plan seemed to be executed well for the giant feint, the main advance being conducted by Crittenden's XXI Corps far to the east flank was not going according to plan. Crittenden's Corps was literally bogged down on the bad roads in the Barrens made worse by the unrelenting rains. From 24 June to 28 June, the XXI Corps was able to cover only twenty-one miles.³¹ During this same period, Thomas and McCook had moved on Tullahoma and had

been waiting for Crittenden near Manchester for two days. Had it not been for the heavy rains and the two-day delay, the campaign might have had a different ending.

On the morning of June 27, Bragg realized that his right flank and rear was being threatened by a strong force. Bragg's original orders to Polk in the evening of June 26 called for him to move his corps out of Shelbyville to the east to attack McCook's flank at Liberty Gap. Polk objected to this plan because he found it impossible to withdraw with a strong force in his front, Stanley and Granger. As a result, Bragg changed the order and Polk's Corps spent Sunday, June 27 withdrawing the eighteen miles back to Tullahoma. At the same time, Cleburne Division of Hardee's Corps would also withdraw out of Liberty Gap and fall back on the Tullahoma defensive works.³² As Polk's Corps evacuated Shelbyville, Granger's Reserve Corps, led by his cavalry, pushed into the town. Many residents of Shelbyville were pro-Union, many calling the town "little Boston". Earlier in the war, a locally raised group of galvanized Yankees, the 1st Middle Tennessee, were sent north to fight on the Union side.³³

On the evening of June 27, Rosecrans was at Manchester where he evaluated the condition of his army. His planned main stroke under Crittenden was stuck in the mud about

twenty miles east of Manchester. Rosecrans' supporting effort under Thomas and McCook had now become his army's main effort. Rosecrans had a striking force of two army corps, however he wanted his third corps to be within supporting distance. By the next morning, he felt that Crittenden would be close enough to launch his attack against Bragg's flank. Only Granger's Reserve Corps was in a position where he could not be of much use but he certainly was in no danger.³⁴

Rosecrans knew that he had Bragg's Army of Tennessee in a trap. All that was left to do was quickly slam the door shut before Bragg could slip out. The harder Rosecrans tried to move his army, the slower he progressed. The rains had been coming down relentlessly for four days and the roads were muddy, bottomless pits. In addition, the streams had become formidable rivers that were difficult to cross.

At Manchester, Rosecrans noticed with great regret the criminal neglect to obey orders in reference to the amount of baggage being carried by his wagon trains. On the afternoon of June 28, he issued another order to reduce the baggage carried because it was seriously hampering the movement and speed of the army.³⁵

On the morning of June 28, Wilder's Brigade was ordered by Thomas to advance southeast out of Manchester, cross the Elk River and attack the Nashville-Chattanooga Railroad at Decherd. Wilder accomplished this, which put him squarely in the rear of the Confederates and completely cut them off from their communication in Chattanooga. Wilder was later pushed back toward Pelham around sundown after briefly taking the town of Decherd.³⁶

While the fight for Decherd was going on, Bragg was holding his first council of war since the campaign began. Upon adjourning the meeting that morning, Bragg had decided to make a stand at Tullahoma. When Polk and Hardee found out about their rear being threatened at Decherd, they both went to see Bragg again on the afternoon of June 29. Polk counseled that he was opposed to making a stand at Tullahoma on the grounds that he feared the army would be cut off from Chattanooga and forced down into northern Alabama. Bragg replied that he had reestablished his communication around Decherd and that he would hold them open by posting cavalry along the line. Polk felt that cavalry could only hold the line for a minimum of thirty-six hours and consequently the Army of Tennessee would be besieged, as was General Pemberton's Army in Vicksburg. Polk feared that the army would starve if they stayed in

Tullahoma or starve if they had to retreat south into the barren hills of north Alabama. Either way, the Federals would have a clear route to Chattanooga and march without interruption into Georgia and the Carolinas, taking possession of the heart of the Confederacy.³⁷

When Bragg asked Hardee if he agreed with Polk's opinion that the army should retreat toward Chattanooga, Hardee replied that General Polk's view carried great weight with him but he was not prepared to advise a retreat. Instead, he advised that some infantry should be sent back along the line to support the cavalry and to wait for further developments. Bragg agreed with Hardee and issued the orders that evening.³⁸

On the morning of June 30, in heavy rains, Thomas began moving his XIV Corps out of Manchester and toward Tullahoma. Crittenden had finally moved all of his XXI Corps into Manchester and Rosecrans now had his army united. Rosecrans' plan seemed to include using Thomas' Corps to hold Bragg in Tullahoma while McCook's and Crittenden's Corps maneuvered south and southwest to outflank the confederate and gain the railroad.

Thomas' objective was a temporary defensive position along Crumpton's Creek near Bobo's Crossroads. Thomas felt that if Bragg stood at Tullahoma he could pin him in

place while Rosecrans maneuvered the other two Corps. If all went well and Thomas could mass enough manpower to turn the Confederate right flank and cut the railroad, the Army of the Cumberland would be in a good position to destroy the entire Army of Tennessee.³⁹

Rosecrans was still showing signs of the cautious commander, however. He was concerned that he had all of his forces on the right flank of Bragg, with the exception of Granger's Reserve Corps. In addition, he was concerned that Bragg might attack his right flank and cut his supply and retreat route back to Murfreesboro. His army could not afford to be without their supply line as he was already low on food due to the bad roads and was in a very barren area for foraging.⁴⁰ The movement went extremely slow allowing Bragg time to react.

With the poor condition of the roads and the Federal attack on the railroad in his rear, Bragg began to worry. On the evening of June 30, Bragg changed his mind and made the decision to retreat. By five o'clock in the morning on July 1, the two corps of the Army of Tennessee was retreating across the Elk River near Decherd and Winchester. The town of Tullahoma was now absent of Rebels and elements of Thomas' Corps moved in. On the evening of July 1, Bragg polled his commanders, Polk and Hardee, by

letter to request their counsel once again. The question put to them was; shall we fight on the Elk or take position at the foot mountain at Cowan? Both Polk and Hardee favored Cowan.⁴¹ Hardee did write a note to Polk on the evening of the 1st, asking for a meeting regarding his concern for Bragg's fitness for command. The meeting never took place due to operations moving too rapidly.

During the days of July 1 and July 2, Rosecrans pressed his army toward the Elk River. On the evening of July 2, portions of the Army of the Cumberland began fording the river in several places. The going was slow however, because the river was extremely swollen from the constant rains. At the same time that Rosecrans was crossing the Elk River, Bragg had decided not to stop at Cowan but instead continue over the Cumberland Mountain and fall back into the defenses of Chattanooga. Polk did not seem to object to retreating over the mountain, but Hardee was outraged that the army did not fight at Cowan. It was his feeling that the foot of the mountain was a very strong defensive position and that both flanks would have been secured against the mountain. Hardee wanted to make a stand, but Bragg issued the orders to keep moving toward Chattanooga very early on the morning of July 2. The Army of Tennessee spent the entire day of July 3 on the run and

by the evening of July 4, Bragg's army, including cavalry, had completely abandoned Middle Tennessee.

The Union was in possession of the mountain and the Tullahoma Campaign came to a close with great success for the north and great failure for the south. At the very same time, General Lee was retreating from Gettysburg and General Grant was accepting surrender from General Pemberton. For Rosecrans, this nine-day campaign was conducted during some of the most adverse conditions. Throughout the campaign, rain fell relentlessly, making the ground over which the army moved almost impossible to maneuver. As a result, the movement of artillery and trains was exceedingly slow.

Casualties for the Army of the Cumberland were minimal. For Braxton Bragg and the Army of Tennessee, the number of killed and wounded is not recorded fully. Although, a few brigade such as Liddell's, Bates' and Johnson's did report casualties in the official records.⁴² The Army of Tennessee did leave behind many prisoners and gear, including 59 officers and 1575 men, 8 field artillery pieces and 3 siege-guns.⁴³ Despite his errors, his illness and his lack of support from both superiors and subordinates, Bragg performed credibly at the tactical level during the retreat from Tullahoma. During the

retrograde, the Confederates never panicked and withdrew as an organized force. Throughout this arduous campaign, under daunting circumstances, Bragg managed to preserve his army and to establish it intact at Chattanooga. Even though the loss of Middle Tennessee would have strategic implications for the Confederacy, much more can be said for Bragg's performance than can be said for Pemberton. Additionally, Bragg had far fewer casualties than did Lee, who inflicted huge casualties on his army due to poor command decisions, especially Pickett's Charge.⁴⁴

The Beginning of the End

The true strategic importance of the Tullahoma position, and for that matter, Middle Tennessee as a whole, never seemed to register with Bragg's superiors in Richmond. Bragg understood the importance of his position, not only for his army but also for the entire Confederacy. He had written his wife, Elise, on July 5, "This is our darkest hour". On July 4, as Bragg retreated across the Tennessee River, Lee pulled his defeated Army of Northern Virginia out of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania and Pemberton

surrendered his entire army to Grant at Vicksburg, Mississippi.⁴⁵

Richmond's full attention had been focused on the eastern and western armies while almost ignoring Bragg's central army. In late May, one of Bragg's divisions had been sent to Mississippi to support Pemberton and on June 25, two days after the Tullahoma Campaign opened, President Davis asked Bragg to reinforce further the armies in Mississippi. Richmond was so out of touch with the condition and plight of their central army that on July 4 the office of the adjutant general had issued orders to a captain to report to Bragg's army at Tullahoma. Bragg's army, however, had left Tullahoma four days earlier. Since the telegraph allowed for same-day correspondence between headquarters, it is almost inconceivable that Richmond could have so lost contact with one of its three major armies.⁴⁶

General Rosecrans' offensive maneuver victory in Middle Tennessee was far superior both tactically and operationally to Major General George Meade's defensive victory at Gettysburg. Although Meade's win boosted morale, especially for the Army of the Potomac, defensive victories would never win the war. Lee escaped from Gettysburg with most of his army and went on to win

defensive victories almost every week during 1864 and still ended up surrendering at Appomattox. Grant's victory at Vicksburg was a huge symbolic victory for the north because of the prestige of the Mississippi River, but winning it had little actual strategic importance because the Confederates had so little commerce west of the river, therefore the south lost virtually nothing.

At the beginning of the war, the Federals stated three major objectives that they needed to accomplish in order to be victorious. First, take Richmond and kill the secessionist spirit by conquering the Rebel capital. This had been attempted repeatedly but never accomplished up to this point. Second, control the Mississippi Valley and secure the western waterways. Grant had accomplished this objective by capturing Vicksburg. Finally, seize east Tennessee and hold the Nashville-Atlanta corridor, which was seen by the Federals as the major artery in the southern lifeline. Rosecrans' Army of the Cumberland had achieved most of this objective in the Tullahoma Campaign and Major General William T. Sherman would finish the objective the following summer. Winning the Tullahoma Campaign and capturing Middle Tennessee was the start of obtaining one of the stated objectives.

Even as Rosecrans was completing his great maneuver campaign at Tullahoma, it seemed to make no impression on Washington. On July 7, Stanton telegraphed Rosecrans the news of the Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg. In the course of imparting the news, Stanton asked a rhetorical question;

"You and your noble army have the chance to give the finishing blow to the rebellion. Will you neglect the chance?"
Rosecrans promptly replied;

"...do not overlook so great an event because it is not written in letters of blood."⁴⁷

As the war dragged on it became evident that the north would not win the war by the destruction of the southern armies but by the destruction of the economy, which supported the Confederate armies. By occupying Middle Tennessee and claiming it for the Union, Rosecrans took the largest and most important step to date toward ending the war.⁴⁸

Despite mistakes that limited the scope of the Federal victory, the six-month long campaign for control of Middle and East Tennessee had ended decisively in favor of the Union. Never again would any substantial part of the state of Tennessee be considered Confederate territory in a military sense. Although Confederate forces would make

several minor and one major movement into the state before the conflict ended, Tennessee was now firmly in Union control. Losing Middle Tennessee would now expose the Deep South to the advancing armies of the Union. Most of East Tennessee was free at last, much to Lincoln's relief. With Chattanooga as the final objective for use as a forward base, the same Union Army of the Cumberland that had won the climactic struggle for Tennessee in the summer of 1863 would open the struggle for Georgia the following spring.⁴⁹

Gettysburg, Vicksburg and Tullahoma Compared

As Grant settled down to besiege Vicksburg and Rosecrans perfected the preparations for his Tullahoma Campaign, Lee reached a decision about his logistical and strategic problems in the eastern theater. Lee desperately wanted to avoid another advance by Hooker around Fredericksburg, which was inevitably to come very soon. In order to avoid fighting with his back to a badly depleted supply area, Lee resolved on another raid north of the Potomac. In Richmond, Lee presented his raid as a way to relieve pressure on Pemberton's besieged army in Vicksburg.

In spite of what he had sold in Richmond about an offensive raid north as a way to relieve threats against other armies, he was entirely focused on his own problem and failed to see the larger strategic picture.

In early June 1863, Lee began his march past Hooker's right flank, not to reach his rear but to carry out a raid into the prosperous farming area of southeastern Pennsylvania. Lee failed to realize that a raid into northern territory would be conceived as an invasion and inevitably a withdrawal, which would appear to be a retreat in defeat. Lee apparently did not consider all the political ramifications of his raid. Had he brought on a general engagement and come out victorious, his army would have been forced to withdraw because they would have exhausted the supplies in the area it controlled. Like after Antietam, his withdrawal would have appeared to be a defeat and so assure a negative balance in the political scales. Compared to Tullahoma and Vicksburg, Gettysburg was a tactical stalemate. Lee lost a third of his army and Meade lost more than a quarter of his. For the south, the raid north was not going to end the struggle, take Washington or save the Mississippi Valley; therefore it had no strategic value. For the north, Gettysburg was a desperate blocking movement and when it was over, they had

not gained a strategic advantage either, except for a boost in morale.

Although the fall of Vicksburg was the final piece of the North's national strategy in the Mississippi Valley, Grant's victory was not due to a great tactical plan. Although Grant finally conquered his objective he never developed any comprehensive plan or concept for seizing Vicksburg with a decisive blow. He had no grand vision, nor did he express any enlightened strategic thinking. The result was that for months Grant would wait for the inept generalship of Johnston and Pemberton to give him an opening where he could take decisive action that would lead to the final capture of the strong hold. In his status reports to Halleck early in the campaign, Grant did not even mention Vicksburg as an objective, but rather cited such intermediate waypoints as Holly Spring, Grenada and others as opportunity might offer. He frequently asked Halleck how far south he should proceed.⁵⁰ Historian Rowena Reed wrote in her book Combined Operations in the Civil War that the common view that Grant and Porter worked hand in glove to develop the correct strategy of attacking from below the city is extravagant as well as factually wrong. Most of these claims are nonsense. Grant had no real strategic plan for the movement that led to the siege, let

alone a combined plan. Nor did anyone in the Union Navy, including Admiral Porter, formulate such a plan. Grant's Vicksburg strategy actually evolved spasmodically. His thinking changed from one extreme to the other, from either no plan at all to spur-of-the-moment impulses, with no objective in mind other than somehow opening the Mississippi.⁵¹

For the south, losing Vicksburg was a huge strategic blow, largely because of its effect on the morale of the southern people. Strategically, Vicksburg was comparable to Tullahoma; however in the greater scheme of the war, the loss of Middle Tennessee was a much more severe blow than was the loss of the Mississippi Valley. This was due to the fact that Middle Tennessee was the head of the great body of supplies in the Deep South and territory west of the Mississippi was not.

Henry M. Cist, historian of the Army of the Cumberland, characterized the campaign of Tullahoma as one of the most brilliant strategic successes of the war.

"The result gave to Rosecrans possession of Middle Tennessee and placed the armies back in the relative positions occupied by them prior to Bragg's advance into Kentucky, a little less than one year previous."⁵²

General Willich summed up the results of the Tullahoma Campaign when he stated,

"It must be to every thinking mind evident that the tide of the rebellion is turned, its hours are measured; that the evil spirits of the Commonwealth have lost their pride and confidence; that they are doomed to their just fate."⁵³

Rosecrans undoubtedly was amazed that Bragg's Army had fled over the mountains to Chattanooga considering the ferocity with which the Confederate soldier had fought at Murfreesboro six months before. Rosecrans considered the outcome of Tullahoma a triumph of strategy and execution, a near perfect application of power and maneuver that had won important territory without a fight. Rosecrans understood that his Army of the Cumberland had just taken a large step forward in the campaign to divide the Confederacy.

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- ³ Ibid. p. 252
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- ⁵ *War of the Rebellion Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*; Series 1, Vol. 23, Part 1&2, (Washington, D. C. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1888-1902) p.424-25, (Hereafter cited as O.R.)
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- ⁹ William M. Lamers, *The Edge of Glory; A Biography of William S. Rosecrans, USA*, (New York, NY, Harcourt, Brace & World 1961) p. 14-17
- ¹⁰ Bowers, *Chickamauga and Chattanooga*, p.24
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- ²⁹ Lamers, *The Edge of Glory*, p. 278
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